‘Little Albert’ regains his identity

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One of psychology's greatest mysteries appears to have been solved. “Little Albert,” the baby behind John Watson's famous 1920 emotional conditioning experiment at Johns Hopkins University, has been identified as Douglas Merritte, the son of a wetnurse named Arvilla Merritte who lived and worked at a campus hospital at the time of the experiment — receiving $1 for her baby's participation.

In the study, Watson and graduate student Rosalie Rayner exposed the 9-month-old tot, whom they dubbed “Albert B,” to a white rat and other furry objects, which the baby enjoyed playing with. Later, as Albert played with the white rat, Watson would make a loud sound behind the baby's head. After a number of conditioning trials, Watson and Rayner reintroduced the animals and furry items without the scary noise. Through the conditioning, the animals and objects that were once a source of joy and curiosity had become a trigger of fear.

Watson had no reason to reveal Albert's true identity, and he never de-conditioned the child. (Watson was also dismissed from the university around the same time because of an affair with Rayner.) Since then, Little Albert's fate and identity have been a recurring question among psychology scholars, including Appalachian State University psychologist Hall P. Beck, PhD, who with a team of colleagues and students, sought answers. For seven years, Beck and his associates scoured historical materials, conferred with facial recognition experts, met with relatives of the boy they theorized was Albert.

Eventually, the pieces of the puzzle came together. The attributes of Douglas and his mother matched virtually everything that was known about Albert and his mother. Like Albert's mother, Douglas's mother worked at a pediatric hospital on campus called the Harriet Lane Home. Like Albert, Douglas was a white male who left the home in the early 1920s and was born at the same time of year as Albert. What's more, a comparison of a picture of Albert with Douglas' portrait revealed facial similarities.

Sadly, the team also discovered that Douglas died at age 6 of acquired hydrocephalus, and was unable to determine if Douglas' fear of furry objects persisted after he left Hopkins.

The team, which also included Sharman Levinson, PhD, of The American University in Paris, and Gary Irons, the grandson of Arvilla Merritte, published their findings in the October *American Psychologist* (Vol. 64, No. 7). The article not only satisfies a long-held curiosity, but also reflects a growing interest in the fate of research participants, says Cathy Faye, of the Archives of the History of American Psychology at the University of Akron. Participants in such famous, controversial studies “have become unwitting protagonists whose stories are told over and over again in psychology textbooks,” she says. “So people become very curious: Who were they, and how did they feel about the experiment?”

Beck is pleased his students have answered some of those questions, but the real bonus, he believes, is what they gained in the research process.

“The search took them beyond the memorization of their lectures and textbooks, and for the first time, into the creative world of psychological research,” he says. “In the end, that was even more important to them than finding Albert.”